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## II. THE WAR AND THE DOCTRINE OF SIN

REV. RICHARD ROBERTS

Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, New York

*Robert Browning somewhere declared his faith in Christianity because it refused to accept a superficial optimism as to human nature but rather "pointed its dart at the head of a lie and taught original sin." Wrongdoing and sin are not quite synonymous. You have to be religious in order to believe in sin. If our personal experiences cannot help us into this religious mood we shall not get the full value of our moral experience.*

"The higher man of today," said Sir Oliver Lodge some time ago, "is not worrying about his sins at all, still less about their punishment; his mission, if he is good for anything, is to be up and doing." Similarly but more soberly Mr. Lowes Dickinson has recorded his view that the emphasis upon the centrality of sin in Christian ethics is "an attitude increasingly unreal to most serious men."

This was, of course, before the war. In those days the general tendency was to minimize sin and to explain it away; but it is questionable whether, when we are able to look in a longer perspective at this colossal inferno in which the world is involved today, we shall be able to dismiss so cavalierly from our reckonings what Lord Morley has described as "that horrid burden and impediment upon the soul which the churches call *Sin* and which by whatever name you call it is a real catastrophe in the moral nature of man."

### I

The reduced view of sin, which the statements quoted from Lodge and Lowes Dickinson accurately reflect, is to be accounted for chiefly by our mod-

ern obsession with the idea of progress. This idea in its current form is a direct derivative from the evolution dogma. After the first sharp shock of resentment upon the publication of the Darwinian hypothesis, we incontinently surrendered to it and began to apply it wholesale in every direction. In particular we introduced it into the study of history and ethics, and in doing so failed to allow adequately for the fact of human freedom. We surrendered to the conception of human perfectibility without remembering the evidence of human perversity to be found both in history and in personal experience. We began to conceive of a universe fated to progress. We formed a mental picture of a world which was solemnly and steadily rolling up a gently inclined plane to the city of God. Plainly in this view of the world the New Testament doctrine of sin would fare badly; our moral defeats and failures were obviously only untoward little incidents of the great cosmic ascent. Our moral imperfection and perversity appeared to be no more than an infantile disease which the forces of progress, aided by a genial Christian culture, would enable us to outgrow. And because the Christian

thinker felt the pressure of the new scientific view of the world, the conversion-gospel of the New Testament became obscured by a culture gospel, a gospel eviscerated almost as tragically as the play of *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out, a gospel devoid of a forthright ethical realism.

There were also other causes contributing to this reduced view of sin—such as the habit of thinking of God in an impersonal way, which was a by-product of the scientific tendency to reduce everything to terms of energy, and a disproportionate conception of the relation of man to the universe arising out of an exaggerated evaluation of mere size. But the main stream was undoubtedly our indiscriminating capitulation to this view of predestined progress. Yet it may be questioned whether the obsession would have become so deep and so general had we not been living in a period of extraordinary material prosperity. Life was exceedingly easy and smooth, taking it as a whole, in the last generation. Distant echoes from Putumayo, an occasional strike, a small war—these things and such as these hardly dented the surface of our complacency. The evenness and comfort of the ordinary man's life made him dull and insensitive to the moral tragedy of the world. On the whole things were going on very well indeed. The old chariot of progress was forging its way bravely up the hill, and presently we should arrive. Just where we were going to arrive did not seem very clear. That, however, did not matter. Wherever it was, we were getting there.

And now the chariot has been suddenly and awfully pitched over a preci-

pice and we are writhing at its foot in blood and tears. We had said complacently that the "ape and tiger" were at the point of death; behold, they have turned upon us and are rending us in pieces. The moral tragedy of the world is being enacted in a muddy, bloody horror before our eyes, and our little fantastic dreams of progress are looking very futile and cheap over against this vast catastrophe. This war is the greatest revelation of the moral perversity of man since Calvary. It is idle, if we want to grasp this situation with any degree of ethical realism, to attempt to reach a moral judgment upon it by a measurement of comparative culpabilities. We all have our convictions upon that point, and they do not lack the confirmation of almost universal unanimity. But there still remains the fact that before God the world of man is a solidarity and mankind a moral unity; and the theologian has the duty of discovering beneath the concrete happenings of the time that universal disorder of which they are the results and symptoms, and which has engulfed the whole world in this tragedy of blood and tears. The one thing we cannot do after this is to belittle sin or explain it away.

## II

We speak much of reconstruction, but we shall rebuild our ruined house upon the sand if we fail to recognize how central to our problem are the ethical implications of the present catastrophe. The theological *impasse* to which we had come in the days before the war, the blind alley at which both liberal and conservative seemed to have arrived,

would appear to indicate the need of a new angle of approach to the data of Christian doctrine, especially to the cross; and it is not inconceivable, it is indeed highly probable, that the war may enable us to find it. But this must become, not alone the base of theological reconstruction, but also the starting-point of the whole colossal task of recovery and reorganization in every department of life. For a living theology cannot be divorced from life itself; nor is it real life that does not create a living theology. We must begin afresh and survey our data in the blazing light of this tremendous day. It is of course impossible for us to surrender the truth of evolution or any of the hard-won gains of scientific thought; but it is equally unthinkable that we can scrap the traditional theological acceptances as so much dead timber. Our task is somehow to effect a synthesis of the treasures both new and old which our past experience and the modern mind have piled up so generously in our intellectual storehouse; and the hope is not groundless that this fusion may at least be started in the terrific furnaces of war.

Our present concern is with one aspect of the problem, but it may fairly be claimed that this aspect is fundamental. It has sometimes been maintained that the teaching of Jesus embodies an interim ethic; but this generation has created an interim ethic for itself. The dogma of progress has led to a more or less explicit theory of the relativity of moral obligation. The degree of moral liability at any given stage of development is determined by the capacity for moral achievement at that stage. The wind is, as it were, tempered to the shorn lamb.

Moral standards are relative and provisional affairs, and at any particular point they are defined by the nature and intensity of the social demand then prevailing. The moral average of the time becomes "the law and the prophets." The sense of an absolute moral order which is never altered or suspended and which cannot be repealed has become faint and rare; and it is the recovery of this sense that we may look for when once the ethical implications of the war become clear.

The war is declaring in terms that cannot be mistaken that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap. It is vindicating what has seemed to many a mere pulpit hyperbole—that there is in the world, for the single soul and for communities, a single moral order which is the ground plan of the universe, and that transgression of this moral order infallibly leads to retribution and is the root of the moral tragedy of the world. It is only when we see, as we see today, the certainty and the scale of the harvest which transgression of the moral order must sooner or later reap, that we realize how stark, how implacable, how uncompromising a thing it is. Historical instances without number might be cited to show how inevitably nations and men who have sown the wind reap the whirlwind. And when one recalls the shameful record of the past generation, that greed which has manifested itself in grasping imperialisms, in backstairs diplomacies, in intrigue and chicanery in high places, in the exploitation of the weak by the strong, in the harsh inequalities of the social order, is it to be wondered at that the outraged moral order should have turned upon us and

plunged us into this pit of desolation and sorrow? "Far the greater part of the seeming prosperity of the world is," said John Ruskin, in 1870, "so far as our present knowledge extends, vain; wholly useless for any kind of good, but having assigned to it a certain inevitable sequence of destruction and sorrow." And the end of this sequence is upon us. Just as a small particle of snow upon an Alpine mountainside moves and gathers volume in its movement until it sweeps upon the valley beneath, a destructive avalanche, so the transgressions and disobediences of men mount and multiply to their certain nemesis of destruction and death. The entail of sin cannot be broken. There is no appeal from this law of moral continuity which inexorably links up the sowing of sin to the harvest of tragedy.

### III

This then, first of all, is the meaning of these searching days. It is the affirmation of an absolute and implacable moral order—the article of a standing or falling world. But that is only one half of the truth. Newman in a memorable passage in the *Apologia* says:

To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of man, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienations, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievement and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing facts, the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things as from unreasoning elements, not toward final

causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and the intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary, hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race so fearfully yet so exactly described in the apostle's words, "Having no hope and without God in the world"—all this is a vision to dizzy and appal.

And he goes on to say that this "heart-piercing, reason-bewildering spectacle" means either that there is no Creator or that "this living society of men is in a true sense discarded for His presence." For himself he concludes that "the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity." And it is impossible to resist the inference—explain it how you will—that there is in man a certain radical dislocation of personality which gives him an inveterate bias to negation and breach of the moral order. Call it "original sin" if you will; by whatever name it is called, it is here, and though we may not be able to account for it or to trace its sources with certainty, we have to reckon with it and to realize that the problem of human redemption is bound up with some effectual remedy for it.

Mr. Bertrand Russell and others have been telling us that the hope of the world lies in a change of heart. It is easier to say this, however, than to tell us how it is to be effected. For here we come upon the paradox that man is both impotent and free. He cannot change his heart at will any more than the leopard can change his spots; yet the assumption

which underlies all religious and ethical theory of any consequence is that he has to accept responsibility for his condition. That human perversity may be plausibly explained as the residuum of our inheritance from the forest and the jungle is obvious, but that does not solve the problem of how it comes to pass that it is universally assumed that man is responsible—at least in a measure—for his moral defeats and failures. If the evolutionist's account of our moral deficiency were true, then we might agree that we would in time outgrow this unhappy inheritance; but we are confronted with the circumstance that this does not square with the facts of the case. The history of man is not a history of ascending moral achievement; it is an affair of ups and downs, of high aspirations and of tragic apostasies, of magnificent leaps forward and of disastrous backslidings. We are driven back by the actual facts to that doctrine of a moral duality which Paul describes in Rom., chap. 7, and which indeed in one form or another may be found in thought prior to Paul.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the best we can say of ourselves is that we have the materials and the possibilities of a change of heart.

#### IV

We must carry our analysis some distance farther if we are to resolve this paradox. Much of the difficulty arises out of the habit of discussing problems of ethics in purely abstract terms, and

therefore of not allowing sufficient weight to the circumstance that morality is an affair of personal relationships. It is convenient to speak of liberty, justice, and the like; but we tend in doing so to hypostatize them and to ascribe to them an existence independent of actual, living men. But liberty, justice, honor, and so forth, describe particular relations between men, and they have no actual existence except as they exist in the mutual attitudes of men. Similarly, when we speak of the moral order we are speaking of a pure abstraction unless we conceive of it as the expression and ordering of a personal will. It is not a scheme of enactments which can be codified and reduced to paper; it is not an objective legislation which operates automatically. It is the living, continuous, and immediate direction and activity of the ultimate Will of the universe; and the breach of the moral order has at last to be interpreted in terms of opposition to that ultimate Will. But will means personality; and our disobedience and transgression rank not as offenses against a code but as affairs between persons, as the clash of wills, as the interruption of a personal relationship.

One does not reach a sense of sin until it is realized as a rupture of personal relationships; and Haering is right when he says that this is a matter of revelation. This question of revelation opens up ground which lies beyond the scope of the present

<sup>1</sup> For example, Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* vi. 1. 21: "It is evident that I have two souls: when the good one prevails, noble acts are done; when the evil one prevails base deeds are attempted." Plato *Phaedo* C. 14: "Again we must observe that there are in each of us two ruling and leading principles, which we follow wherever they lead; one being an inborn desire of pleasures, the other something that has been acquired, aiming at what is best."

paper; but it may be observed that the general eclipse of the idea and experience of revelation in current religion (due doubtless to the pressure of the popular rationalism precipitated by the great but ill-understood achievement of the scientific method) accounts largely for "higher man of today's" light-hearted attitude to his sin. Because it is moral defeat and failure, or at the worst an offense against an abstract moral order, he finds it comparatively easy to forgive himself his sin and to dismiss it from his thoughts. But those stern old moral realists, Paul and Augustine, did not find that the matter could be handled so lightly. To them it seemed as if the bottom of their universe had fallen out and that they had (to use Newman's words) "been discarded from the presence of God." It may be true that the conviction of sin has sometimes been made excessively acute by the complication of morbid psychological elements in this individual or that; but it remains unquestionable that the difference between the attitude of Augustine and that of "the higher man of today" toward his personal moral condition is not one of degree but one of kind. It is the difference between seeing the same fact in the light of natural faculty and seeing it in the light of revelation. The judgment of natural faculty upon Jesus was that he was "Elias, or Jeremias, or one of the prophets," but it was the light of revelation that showed to

Peter that he was "the Christ of God." In the light of nature the church may be the body of believers, but in the light of the Spirit it is the body of Christ. And similarly sin may seem in the light of natural faculty to be moral defeat and failure, but in the light of revelation it is seen as a personal estrangement, not as coming short of human liability but as "coming short of the glory of God."

## V

This immediately transports the moral problem of the world on to another plane. The moral struggle gains a new reality and a new hopefulness when it is seen as the interaction and co-operation of living wills, the human and the divine, and not as the impotent and desperate struggle of the soul to conform to an abstract and impersonal moral order. The true nature of sin becomes apparent. It is misdirection of personality; it is self-assertion as against God.<sup>1</sup> Paul calls it roundly "enmity against God"; and just because it is this, it is remediable. If we were only the residuary legatees of the anthropoid ape we should have to wait for the slow process of evolution to deliver us from this tragic entail; but because there is another party in the case the problem is greatly simplified. The presumption indeed is that granted the good-will of the second party the problem may be solved out of hand.

This is virtually the New Testament diagnosis of the situation. It affirms

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Theologia Germanica* (Golden Treasury Series, p. 7): "When the creature claimeth for its own anything good, such as Substance, Knowledge, Life, Power, and in short whatever we should call good, as if it were that or possessed that—as often as this cometh to pass the creature goeth astray. What did the devil do else or what was his going astray and his fall else, but that he claimed for himself to be also somewhat, and would have it that somewhat was his, and something was due him. This setting up of a claim, and his I and Me and Mine, these were his going astray and his fall. And thus it is to this day."

the hope of human perfectibility without obscuring the fact of human perversity. It contemplates the moral tragedy of the world in all its length and breadth, and it propounds a remedy for it. How the remedy is applied to the disorder starts a question too large for treatment here; it raises of course the Christian doctrine of atonement. But of the nature of the remedy this is to be said, that it is consistently expressed in terms of revolution or reversal. The great characteristic words which describe the process are conversion, regeneration, resurrection (Eph. 2:1), redemption, and reconciliation; it is a transformation, a new beginning, life for death, liberty for bondage, fellowship for enmity. The characteristic process in nature may be, in Bergson's phrase, creative evolution; the primary process of grace in creative revolution. Its first products are the "new man" and the "new creation."

If the church is to discharge its due and proper share in the moral recovery

of the world (and to the church falls the fundamental part of the task), it must recover with a new and overwhelming vividness the New Testament outlook upon the moral problem of the world. This is a question independent of the validity or otherwise of critical methods of Bible study; it is first of all a question of moral insight. The history which has culminated in this present catastrophe vindicates beyond a peradventure the New Testament diagnosis of our human distemper, and it leaves us no room for hope save in the New Testament remedy. For the futilities of a genial culture gospel we must bring to the world again the power and the hope of a conversion gospel. And this is contingent upon our thinking no longer in terms of ephemeral and transient speculative theory, but in terms of the broad but sharp moral realism of the Christian Scriptures. We must recover, that is, the habit of thinking on the New Testament scale and of speaking with the distinctive New Testament accent.